

Brush Mountain Conservation Area



Land Use And Management Plan

Town of Northfield

April 2006

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Introduction

The Town of Northfield acquired title to the 46-acre parcel (Assessors Map 50-A-2) known as Brush Mt. Conservation Area with the invaluable assistance of Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust. The parcel came to the attention of the Board of Selectmen as a result of a Ch. 61 change of use. Mt. Grace preacquired the land in 2005 to hold while the Board of Selectmen secured financing. The purposes of preserving this parcel include the following: 1) to ensure access to the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail (MM Trail), an historic footpath; 2) to preserve the homestead site of Calvin Swan (1799 - 1875), a noted freeborn African-American resident of Northfield; 3) to prevent the fragmentation of unbroken forest land; 4) to protect wildlife habitat; and 5) to preserve a spectacular scenic overlook. Town Meeting voted to support the project by authorizing borrowing to secure financing by a vote of 147-7 at a special town meeting on November 28, 2005. Two days later a majority of the voters approved the debt exclusion by a paper ballot.

1. Grant Program Requirement

Both the Northfield Conservation Commission and the Northfield Board of Selectmen voted to support the project and to apply for funding through the Massachusetts Self-Help Program. As part of receiving the \$70,400 grant from the Division of Conservation Services (DCR), the Town of Northfield signed a Self-Help Project Agreement which documents the legal protection for the land. The Agreement acknowledges Article 97 of the Massachusetts Constitution which states in part,

“Lands or Easements taken or acquired for such park, recreation or conservation purposes shall not be used for other purposes or otherwise disposed of except by laws enacted by a two-thirds vote, taken by yeas and nays, of each branch of the General Court.”

The complete text of the Project Agreement is included in the Appendix. The grant requires a parking lot, sign, and the Land Use and Management Plan.

2. Description of Parties involved in the plan

Upon receiving the Ch. 61 request for change of use, the Northfield Board of Selectmen asked Mt. Grace Land Conservation (MGLCT) to evaluate the Brush Mt. parcel. Recognizing its potential, MGLCT agreed to preacquire the property if the Town of Northfield would apply for a Massachusetts Self Help Grant through DCS. The grant would pay about 64% of the cost of the land. The remaining funds would be raised by the town through grants, donations and town funds. Both the Board of Selectmen and the Conservation Commission voted to support the project.

The Northfield Open Space Plan, drafted by a group of volunteers appointed by the Board of Selectmen and assisted by Franklin Regional Council of Governments planner Bill Labich, was almost complete, but a permanent Open Space Committee was not yet formed. Joanne McGee, a town resident and volunteer with Mt. Grace, served as a liaison between the Town of Northfield and Mt. Grace.

The Northfield Conservation Commission will be responsible for the management and maintenance of the Brush Mt. Conservation Area with assistance from the newly-appointed Northfield Open Space Committee. The Conservation Commission appointed member Joan Deely to be its representative member on the Open Space Committee.

The Berkshire Chapter of the Appalachian Mt. Club (BCAMC), which is responsible for the location and maintenance of the MM Trail, pledged \$5000 for the project in July 2005 and requested that a trail easement be placed in the deed. However, because of the timing, an easement could not be placed in the deed. The decision about the trail easement would need to be in place before the appraisals were done in early spring of 2005. Because the BCAMC is responsible for the location and maintenance of the MM, contact information will be available in this Land Use and Management Plan.

3. Site Description

A. Recreational Resources

The Metacomet-Monadnock Trail (MM Trail), an historic footpath from the Metacomet Ridge in Connecticut to Mt. Monadnock in New Hampshire, travels along the high ridge of Brush Mountain before descending down to Gulf Road. This stretch of the MM trail from South Mountain Road to Gulf Road, with its breath-taking views at Mt. Crag, is one of the most popular sections of the entire 160-mile trail. Mt. Crag views look east, south and west. A second scenic overlook on top of Brush Mt. gives a complimentary view looking east, north and west into New Hampshire and Vermont. Hikers from these overlooks can see their destination - Mt. Monadnock.

By preserving access to the MM trail, acquisition of the parcel secures the MM trailhead now located on a tiny parcel of land owned by Northeast Utilities next to the

Brush Mt. parcel at Gulf Road. 'Through' hikers cross Gulf Road and start up into the Bald Hills through the Northfield State Forest on their way to Mt. Monadnock.

An old logging road on the parcel near Gulf Road intersects with the MM trail and leads across a transmission line to a 123-acre parcel (Assessor Map 45-A-11) recently acquired for conservation by Mt. Grace LCT. Informally known as Brush II, this parcel has a number of trails and logging roads on the west side of Brush Mt. In the future this parcel will be a key component in ensuring access to a dramatic and unusual waterfall known as the Cascades.

A few remnants of trail at the base of Brush Mt. indicate the former location of the MM trail, which was moved at the request of a former owner.

B. Historic Resources

The Brush Mt. parcel is the home of noted Northfield resident Calvin Swan (1799 – 1875), a freeborn African American who was a respected member of the thriving 19th century community located in this area of Northfield. As a teenager, Swan worked for the Stearns brothers, the builders responsible for the fine 19th c. houses on Main St. in Northfield. Swan became a carpenter and sawmill owner, and was active in anti-slavery societies both in Northfield and in Franklin County. His children attended nearby District School #6, which is still standing at the corner of Gulf and Orange Road.

An initial inventory of the house site includes one large, well-preserved cellar hole with a small attached hole outlined with rocks, a long, narrow, deep 'cellar hole' which may be a saw pit, an 'L' shaped outline of rocks and a working well.

Elizabeth A. Congdon has done extensive research on Calvin Swan and is considered to be the most knowledgeable person about his life and his home on Brush Mt. She presented her research at the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife in June 2003. Boston University selected her research paper, "Calvin T. Swan, African-American Carpenter in Rural Massachusetts", to be published in *Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 2003: Slavery /Antislavery in New England*, (Boston, MA: Boston University, 2003. pp. 115-127). A copy of the Proceedings is included with this plan and is also available at Dickinson Memorial Library. Betty is continuing this research and should be contacted by anyone working at the site. (498-2729 or mailto: betty_congdon@nmhschool.org)

An old logging road (the original path of the MM Trail) leads from Gulf Road through this historical area, curves around to intersect with the current location of the MM trail, and continues across the transmission line and onto the west slope of Brush Mt., a 125-acre forested parcel purchased by Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust for conservation purposes. This parcel is known informally as Brush II.

C. Natural Resources

The forests on the lower portion of Brush Mt. are mixed northern hardwood changing to hemlock as the land rises steeply to the ridge. The parcel is part of a tract of

contiguous, undeveloped forest that extends from north to south in eastern Northfield. Two undeveloped forested parcels owned by Northfield Mt. Hermon School (NMH) adjoin the 1800-acre Northfield State Forest on the east side of the road. The Quabbin to Cardigan Conservation Initiative, a large scale collaboration of public and private conservation partners led by Society for the Preservation of New Hampshire Forests, has identified much of the east Northfield forestland in its area of concern. The Brush Mt. Project is adjacent to a priority region of the Quabbin to Cardigan Conservation Collaborative.

A continuous ridgeline of traprock connects Crag Mt. and Brush Mt. and is a classic example of a ‘roche moutonnee’, an abraded knob of bedrock formed by an overriding glacier. Hikers can see the direction and path of the glacier in the bedrock at the top of both Mt. Crag and Brush Mt. It is also clearly seen along the west side ridges and in the bedrock under the transmission line.

Along the MM trail there is a prime example of a condensation garden. At the southern edge of the property on the west side of the ridge is a woodland shrub swamp with an unusual component of black gum trees, high bush blueberries and sphagnum moss hummocks. Black gum swamps in Northfield are listed as “imperiled” on the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species BioMap of Core Habitat. Also on the west side of the main ridge is a series of rock ledges, smaller ridges and narrow secluded valleys with shallow wetland depressions. A small stream in one of these depressions forms the upper portion of a tributary into Millers Brook, part of the Connecticut River Watershed. The stream leaves the Brush Mt. parcel, crosses under Gulf Road and becomes the tributary listed as BioMap Core Habitat for vertebrates including the Common Salamander (*Gyrinophilus porphyriticus*). The wetland area on the conservation land is identical to the habitat down stream in the BioMap Core Habitat. The secluded depressions west of the ridge and lookout are undisturbed and excellent habitat for wildlife; the valleys form natural wildlife corridors. Among the ridges and bedrock along the trail there are good examples of snake hibernacula (hibernation areas).

4. Land Use

A. Habitat protection

Consideration of the Brush Mountain parcel for protection became imperative when the property was released from Ch. 61 to be sold to private landowners whose plans included house construction. In addition to the area’s physical characteristics and to the presence of the MM trail, a number of wildlife features contribute to the parcel’s value as conservation land.

These features include a black gum swamp, an easily-accessible condensation garden, a hilltop community along much of the MM Trail and extensive hemlock ravines on the western portion of the parcel. There are numerous examples of early succession on exposed bedrock.

A designated Core BioMap Area lies just to the north of the property; similar features are located on the western portion of parcel and should receive further exploration.

B. Public Access

Parking Area: The site for the parking area was chosen to provide convenient public access to existing and future trails, including the MM trail, and to the historic Swan homestead site. It is located on Gulf Rd. on the eastern border of the property. Designated handicapped parking is included.

Trails: The primary trail on the property is the Metacomet~Monadnock trail, which passes from north to south along the top of the ridge. The Berkshire Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club (BCAMC) is responsible for location and maintenance of this trail.

In addition, there is a relatively wide logging/access road that runs from Gulf Road through the lower hardwood forests to the west side of Brush Mt.

C. Passive Recreation

1. Non-motorized use: Hiking, birding, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing will be encouraged on trails throughout the property. Horse-back riding will also be permitted, although some trails designed to provide access to unique habitat features may be unsuitable for horseback riding as they would be too narrow.

2. Motorized Use – Snowmobiles: Snowmobiles are not permitted on the MM Trail, which runs through the Brush Mountain property. As this parcel is not part of any formal snowmobile winter routes, and is fairly steep in places, it is not anticipated that there will be any such activity. However, the property is adjacent to power lines, which can provide clear routes for such use, and may provide access to the property. Small plastic or metal signs will be posted along Brush Mountain boundaries with the power lines. A locked metal gate will be installed across the access road on Gulf Rd., thereby restricting motorized access to the property. The gate will allow access by the fire and police department in case of emergency.

3. Motorized Use – All Terrain Vehicles: Use by all off-road all-terrain vehicles is prohibited. This prohibition is consistent with the Department of Conservation and Recreation's prohibition in neighboring Northfield State Forest.

D. Forestry

In consultation with and subject to the approval of the Northfield Conservation commission and the Northfield Open Space Committee, arrangements may be made to manage agreed upon sections of the forests on the property. The hemlock ravines on the western portion of the property would not be included in management plans.

E. Hunting

Hunting has traditionally been permitted on this property and on adjacent properties. Hunting is also allowed in the neighboring Northfield State Forest.

5. Management Plan

The following activities will be required to enhance public use of the property and ensure good stewardship of the land.

A. Demolition of Shack

Raze shack. A dilapidated shack on Gulf Road on the eastern side of the property must be razed. This may be a project for volunteers if the Town of Northfield DPW cannot complete the work.

B. Boundary Maintenance

The boundaries of the property are inconsistently marked and are in need of improvement.

Walk the perimeter of the property at least once a year. Renew colored plastic flagging at corners and along the lot lines so that the boundaries remain clear. Install small plastic or metal signs indicating that the property is Brush Mt. Conservation Area, Town of Northfield.

C. Parking Area

Add more gravel as needed. The need to replenish gravel will be assessed annually.

D. Historical and Cultural Research

Conduct archeological assessment. The Northfield Historical Commission will plan an archeological assessment of the historic Swan homestead site by a qualified professional. This initial assessment will also outline the extent of additional exploration of the site, in addition to providing information for use in interpretative materials. Betty Congdon, who is researching Calvin Swan's life, should be contacted by anyone working at the site. (498-2729 or betty_congdon@nmhschool.org)

E. Overlook Views

1. **Maintain/broadening existing views.** Maintenance of the tri-state views from the apex of the MM trail will require pruning or cutting trees as necessary. Such activities will be conducted under the supervision of the Appalachian Mt. Club.

F. Trail Creation and Maintenance

1. **Metacomet~Monadnock Trail.** The Trails Committee of the BCAMC is responsible for the location and maintenance of the MM Trail here in Northfield and all portions in Massachusetts with the help of dedicated volunteers from throughout Western Massachusetts. Harry Sharbaugh of Erving is the volunteer responsible for the location and maintenance of the MM Trail in Erving, Northfield, and Warwick. His contact information is 413-422-2144 and unklharry@webtv.net. The Chair of the Trails Committee for the BCAMC is Pat Fletcher (413-562-9863 and trails@amcberkshire.org). Further information about the MM is found at <http://amcberkshire.org/trails/mmtrail>.

2. **Additional trails.** Additional trails under consideration include a short one connecting the parking area to the MM Trail, access to the homestead from the parking lot, an interpretative trail around the homestead.

New trails will be created only if needed and will adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Non-motorized use – Newly constructed trails will be narrow and not authorized for motorized use.
 2. Former logging/access roads – where possible, new trails will follow former logging roads, allowing their use in the event of future timber harvests. In addition, access for fire trucks will be maintained.
 3. Access to features of particular interest on the property
3. **Erosion Control.** To prevent erosion problems that may result from unauthorized use of motorized vehicles on the trails, the access road on Gulf Rd. will be blocked by a locking metal gate. Such a gate will ensure emergency vehicle access to the property if

needed. Work with the AMC to assess the need for some erosion control on the MM trail leading to the summit from Gulf Road.

G. Outreach/community involvement

Explore a variety of ways to involve Northfield residents in the Town's new conservation property. Suggested activities include contributions to flora and fauna species lists, collection of historical information about the Swan family and their contributions to the town, and trail cutting and maintenance workdays done with the supervision of the Berkshire Chapter of the AMC.

H. Educational Programs

There is excellent potential for conducting educational programs on the property. Assets include: parking for participants; availability of knowledgeable and willing instructors (town residents, possibly Northfield Mountain Educational and Recreation Center personnel); presence of the historic Swan homestead; presence of MM trail on the property; unique and/or unusual habitats; geological features; and diversity of plants and wildlife on the property.

Educational topics could include:

- a) tree and shrub identification
- b) geological history
- c) bird identification
- d) cultural and historical site interpretation
- e) land use history
- f) wildlife tracking
- g) forest ecology
- h) wetlands ecology of black gum swamp
- i) mushroom identification

I. Open Space Appreciation

To showcase new trails as well as to increase use and appreciation of the MM Trail, the Northfield Open Space Committee could sponsor hikes, snow-shoe outings and cross-country ski trips on the property as a means of:

- a) encouraging people to enjoy the natural beauty of the area;
- b) organizing local residents to get involved in assisting with trail maintenance;
- c) educating the public about the importance of protecting wildlife habitat and unique ecosystems;

- d) appreciating local history, our predecessors and the impact they had on our town and its lands;
- e) building support for future open space protection and acquisition;
- f) demonstrating connections between the MM Trail and nearby trail networks.

J. Signs

Additional signs will help identify and interpret various aspects of the Brush Mountain site. Some suggestions include:

- a) **Informational and interpretive kiosk** at the parking lot;
- b) **Interpretive signs** at the historic Swan homestead;
- c) **Interpretive signs** at the black gum swamp, condensation garden, tri-state vista, and other sites with noteworthy features;
- d) **Explanatory signs** regarding authorized and non-authorized uses of trails, directions and any required disclaimers;
- e) **Trail maps**;
- f) **“Take only pictures, leave only footprints”** sign;
- g) **Hunting policy**, hunting season and suggested precautions for hikers during active season.
- h) Small BMCA (Brush Mt. Conservation Area) signs along the boundary of the property.
- i) Additional smaller signs as needed at alternate access points.

K. Invasive Exotic Species

Initial informal survey of the Brush Mountain property has not discovered the presence of invasive exotic plants. This assessment may change as more in-depth surveys are conducted. Regardless of the findings, annual surveying should be done. Any such plant species will be mapped and removed.

L. Management Issues to Consider Over Time

1. Handicap accessibility/Access for the Elderly. Much of the hiking trail topography is somewhat steep, and may be difficult to adapt for handicap accessibility. It may be possible to provide limited access by ‘paving’ a short loop with embedded wood chips. Are there portions of the property that may lend themselves to this end? Could accessibility to the historic Swan homestead be provided?

2. Impact of Parking Area. What impact, if any, will the parking area have on the property, and will there be any attendant stewardship issues?

3. Timber Harvesting. Are any portions of the property suitable for timber harvesting, without harming wildlife, historic or recreation values?

4. Trail Degradation. Will there be persistent issues with trail degradation due to unauthorized use by motorized vehicles or mountain bikes?

M. Additional Research

1. Archeology of historic Swan homestead. Complete detailed archeological study of Swan homestead and associated outbuildings.

2. History of Swan homestead. Research history of Swan homestead and surrounding community, including nearby schoolhouse. Research history of African-Americans in Northfield, as well as antislavery activities in this area.

3. Wildlife Habitat Management Recommendations. The Northfield Conservation Commission will secure the services of a qualified wildlife biologist to survey the property. The intent is to rely on volunteers or qualified students researchers. Future management decisions will be based in large part on the recommendations of these people.

4. Rare and Endangered Species. Investigate presence of rare and endangered species on the property. A BioMap Core Habitat is located nearby (off-site), raising the possibility that such conditions may be present here as well.

6. Map of the Property

Annotated plan of Lot 50-A-2 with Metacomet~Monadnock Trail, natural resources, parking lot and proposed trails. Not drawn to scale.